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"I didn't know you were into that sort of thing?!": Or Theoretical Confessions of an Environmental Archaeologist

Benjamin Gearey 

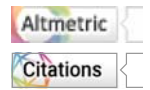
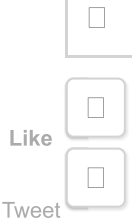
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Some years back I remember mentioning to a colleague, as I was leaving a certain conference early to head to another one, The Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference (TAG Dublin in fact, which is now, I suppose, more than 'some years' back) to be met with the response: 'I didn't know you were into that sort of thing!'. Those words stuck with me; they made me laugh, as if I'd admitted to something really very risqué and inappropriate. I'd apparently acquired an interest in 'that sort of thing' as a callow postgraduate in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sheffield in the early 1990s. It was impossible to avoid 'theory' there, with Mike Parker Pearson, Paul Halstead, Glynis Jones, John Moreland, the late Marek Zvelebil and others teaching and researching, although I was studying on the slightly less fashionable MSc rather than the MA (to this day, I can only think of Shanks and Tilley ([1987](#)) as 'The Red Book' as a result of joining conversations with the latter students).

Confession #1: I arrived at Sheffield armed with a degree in History, with my archaeological knowledge extending to Roman Britain: I was totally unprepared for the business end of Halstead's 'Middle Range theory' or Parker Pearson's 'post-processualism' and spent quite some months wondering what the hell everyone was talking about. But what it did instill in me, once I'd got over the initial shock and confusion, was the importance of a questioning perspective and a critical attitude to the belief that the past was important just *because...*

Probably the one surefire way to start a debate in a given room of archaeologists, no matter their period, specialism, or place of employment, is to mention the 'T-word'. Few subjects in the discipline polarise opinion more than archaeological theory. Anyone else who's ever mentioned that they're going to TAG has probably been met by a groan and



eyes thrown to heaven by some colleague, and perhaps a comment similar to the one delivered to me that time. This is in many ways understandable: phrases such as 'the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*', 'Ingoldian taskscapes' or 'flat ontologies', which may be part of the vocabulary of the theoretically engaged, can sound like the deliberate language of exclusion to others.

How many people have read *Being and Time* (Heidegger [1927](#)) in the original?

Confession #2: not me. (But I have read the excellent and clear summary of Heidegger's work and thought by Caputo ([2018](#)); highly recommended.) Over the years I've been going, TAG has provided both the most thought-provoking as well as at times the most impenetrable discussions, employing language and concepts I have a tenuous grasp on at very best and no idea what is being discussed at worst (Confession #3). But here's the other thing: no one else who regards themselves as 'theoretically engaged' has time to engage theoretically with every new (or often, old) school of thought. Nor, I would suggest, is this desirable or necessary.

Probably the biggest single issue for me concerns the definition or *assumed* definition of 'theory'. For many people, and this split is not one of 'environmental' versus 'other' archaeologists, the word theory is often pejorative: 'arm-waving bullsh*t' or worse. For some, the definition is critical in a foundational sense: 'real' practitioners don't 'do' theory; theory is unimportant to those at the trowel's edge or, in the context of this publication, to those at the microscope's eyepiece...

I've always taken a fairly simple, possibly naive, starting point: to practise any archaeology of any form is to assume a theoretical position whether one acknowledges or recognises it or not: from the most basic assumption that the study of the past is valuable in some form, through to the interpretative frameworks we utilise in different sub-fields: it's theory of one form or another all the way down. How can it not be? This belief is of course hardly original (see Johnson [2010](#)). To state that theory is 'arm waving...' is itself to adopt a theoretical stance: one that implicitly holds one's own approach is of incontrovertible self-evident value and definition. As I try and encourage the 2nd year archaeology students in seminars held as part of the 'History of Archaeological Thought' module at UCC, I regard a theoretical archaeological engagement as being defined first and foremost as *thinking about thinking* (Confession #4: this is my short, inadequate summary of 'theory', if pushed to make one). So any reflection in this way is 'practising' theory: it's not by definition necessary to employ arcane language or concepts from the first off. But, what it does require is a willingness to confront one's own intellectual vulnerability and assumptions.

The deeper down this rabbit hole one descends (or tumbles...), certain words and tried concepts, become useful or necessary to frame or capture the essence of thought. Which leads me to Confession #5: I enjoy the sense of disorientation and at times, mixing metaphors, loss of the reassuring gravity of one's own disciplinary orbit, that thinking theoretically can bring. Another way of putting it, and I owe this concept to many discussions with Prof. Henry Chapman over the years: to think theoretically is to view familiar concepts through a different lens, one that can lead to new perspectives on old questions (see Chapman [2018](#)). Looking through a different lens can make familiar territory look rather alien. There can of course be dense language in theory that is sometimes apparently impenetrable: but then so is the average palaeoecological paper, or many other archaeological science publications, if that's not your '...sort of thing'.

The articles in this issue of *Internet Archaeology* are, with two exceptions, written versions of presentations given at the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference in Bradford in 2015. The session was entitled '*Short on cover and humming with crossfire: Revisiting Environmental Archaeology Method and Purpose*' (EAMP for short; Albarella [2001](#)). The latter volume was itself the product of a session held at TAG Birmingham in 1998: over 20 years have thus passed between the two. The intention was not to revisit all the questions and issues in close detail, but to use the publication as a touchstone to reflect on changes and developments in environmental archaeology since the late 20th century.

Something that stands out in terms of both sessions and publications is the underlying motivation for the contributors to question assumptions about *why* environmental archaeology is a worthy subject of enquiry and *how* this value is defined, developed and communicated. In many ways the intellectual landscape is noticeably different. In particular, the development and progress made through new analytical techniques has led to claims of another 'scientific revolution' (Kristiansen [2017](#)). Less positive 'turns' include those in higher education, particularly in the UK, leading to new research pressures on the discipline (see Howard, [this issue](#)). Other agendas such as Public Archaeology (Law, [this issue](#)) did not feature in the original session but have grown significantly since 1998. The potential synergies between archaeology and other fields such as the Environmental Humanities offer new perspectives for both: [Andy Hoan](#) draws palaeoecology into conversation with ecocriticism, while [Erin Kavanagh and Mar Bates](#) demonstrate how the arts, sciences and humanities can also meet through different 'ways of knowing' and The Deep Map.

The TAG Bradford session was also fortunate to include input from Professor Terry O'Connor, who was responsible for the original evocative expression: '...short on cover and humming with crossfire...' (O'Connor [2001](#)) and he presents his take on the church up (and now corpse strewn?) 'no persons ground' two decades on (O'Connor, [this issue](#)). Liz Pearson was also in attendance at both sessions and her article considers the state of play in commercial environmental archaeology, reflecting in particular on the potential for contribution to research questions despite ever-present pressures (Pearson, [this issue](#)).

Another issue related to what may be referred to as epistemology, is that since the publication of EAMP, certain of the separate 'sub-fields' of 'environmental archaeology' have clearly developed their own theoretical agendas more explicitly than others. The emergence of 'social archaeozoology', for example (e.g. Russell [2011](#)), or the developments in archaeobotany that Lisa Lodwick discusses in her comprehensive summary (Lodwick, [this issue](#)). This can be contrasted with palaeoecology, especially palynology, which as a rule has little tradition of explicit theoretical exposition (Richer and Gearey [2017](#)). Just to be clear, I don't intend that comment as a denigration of all the technical and methodological progress that has evidently been made in this field, more a statement of fact that I expect few palaeoecologists would disagree with.

Some might also say that theory is someone else's problem, to be applied after the data are collected (Edwards *et al.* [2015](#)); to which in part at least I would respond by pointing them at Confession #4. Critical reflection, attempting to examine the 'substructure' underlying our disciplinary assumptions, in whatever field or sub-field we work in, is important in leading to new debates, perspectives and ultimately applied research directions. See for example, current discussions of 'decolonising' subjects such as anthropology and democratising the generation of ecological knowledge (Ramirez *et al.* [2018](#)), challenging contemporary issues from which no discipline should feel immune, and rooted in theoretical reflection. The article by Richer *et al.* ([this issue](#)) can be flagged here: if we intend our data to be accessible to others then we cannot assume that its application or use is entirely self-evident. Such discussion is relevant at a time when archaeology more generally seems to be attempting to find ways to better engage with political and social issues.

My own recent attempts to 'see' palaeoecology through 'different lenses' owes much to collaboration with my editorial colleagues on this publication, to Suzi Richer (Richer and Gearey [2018](#); and other Richer and Gearey [meanderings](#)) and to Seren Griffiths (Griffiths and Gearey [2017](#)); I'd hope that, if anything, these might spur reflections on

maybe disagreements on the practice of palaeoecology in the 21st century. Maybe they also help demonstrate that theoretical perspectives don't always have to draw on archaeological knowledge or philosophies.

The editor of *Environmental Archaeology: Meaning and Purpose*, Umberto Albarella, was a discussant for the TAG Bradford session but was unable to contribute to this publication. However, he has recently revisited one of the central questions and motivations for the original session: what is environmental archaeology? Or perhaps, what should it be? His conclusions are that now, as then, to separate environmental archaeology off from archaeology in its broadest sense is to ignore the common ground that should unite both (Albarella 2018). My own reflections on this have also been published recently (Gearey 2018) and I wonder if the time is perhaps overdue that we stop using the expression 'environmental archaeology', other than as shorthand for a set of techniques? To return to the previous paragraph, even that definition is problematic as the techniques included under this umbrella clearly don't apply *themselves* to archaeological remains, but are employed in different contexts by different communities of practice. Whether it is possible to separate the two is possibly a question for, well, further theoretical reflection.

A final note: the colleague who made that pre-TAG comment all those years ago, is the author of one of the papers in this volume. So it transpires they were, just a little bit, 'into that sort of thing' too. But that's a confession for the person involved; I couldn't possibly 'out' them as being a 'theory head' after all...

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